



IF BIDEN WINS

REGARDLESS OF THEIR POLITICAL LEANINGS, VOTERS agree that Donald Trump has refused to be constrained by the norms of the office of the president. He dispenses with White House habits and traditions as often as he honors them, delighting his supporters and angering his critics.

While this dynamic and its implications for the country has been well-diagnosed, less attention has been paid to its impact on the other kind of chief executive.

Corporate CEOs, particularly those based in the US, have spent the last four years learning a useful set of skills for engaging with—and avoiding criticism from—the President.

To this day, those of us in crisis advisory work often hear, “Whatever happens, we want to avoid the President tweeting about us.”

A Biden Administration would offer fewer risk-free opportunities for executives to take stands on issues, writes Brunswick’s **RAUL DAMAS**.

And, to the C-suite's credit, there are increasingly fewer public squabbles between President Trump and CEOs or their companies. Business leaders have demonstrated tremendous adaptability and learning agility, as one would expect of seasoned executives.

Should Donald Trump be re-elected, we can expect these executives to continue navigating a terrain they've come to know well.

But for CEOs who assumed the role during the past four years, this is the only administration they've known as heads of corporate state. Should Joe Biden become president, they will need to learn a new set of skills, which recall the norms of past administrations.

Following are principles that leaders experienced in dealing with a Trump Administration should keep in mind when planning for a potential Biden Administration.

There will be fewer risk-free opportunities to take public stands on issues. For the past several years, companies and their chief executives have received praise for taking public positions that already enjoyed broad popular support, especially among the elite audiences critical to corporate reputations. Think of the opposition to the President's remarks following Charlottesville, his executive order banning visitors from predominantly Muslim countries, and the escalation of trade-based conflict with China.

Given Joe Biden's personality and ideology, his administration would be less likely to employ rhetoric or implement policies that would provide CEOs with such easy opportunities to seize the ethical or political high ground. Instead, corporate leaders should expect to be asked to publicly voice their position on issues more painful to their immediate business interests. In other words, opposing higher corporate tax rates will require more executive courage than it took to oppose religion-based travel restrictions.

Big business filled a void...that's about to be re-filled. Opinion research shows that trust in the business world and its leadership is at a multi-year high. This reputational spike has coincided with a decline in public confidence in government, driven by Congressional gridlock and the perception of a relatively inactive government, including the White House.

Given Biden's long tenure in Congress, we should expect his administration to be much more interested in the policymaking process and more engaged in negotiating compromises than the current administration. So, to the degree that public support for corporate leadership was a function of

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the government dysfunction often driven and celebrated by the Trump Administration, we can expect that dynamic to reverse itself in a Biden Administration. It will not be enough for corporations to simply be "the adult in the room." In order to be heard, CEOs will also need to deliver credible and constructive solutions to the nation's problems.

It will take more resources (but less effort) to deal with government. With a few exceptions, the Trump Administration has failed to generate sustained, constructive partnerships with private sector organizations and leaders. For most companies, dealing with this administration has been a challenging, sometimes-confusing effort, where clear, consistent engagement is rare.

A Biden Administration is more likely to demand that the private sector contribute to national rebuilding efforts—with respect to the pandemic, the economy, and other issues—but it will probably



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also be a more reliable negotiating partner. This new administration would be more adept at pressuring the private sector to devote attention and resources toward government priorities, but it would also likely make it easier for companies to engage the Administration on a day-to-day basis.

As corporate leaders plan for various post-election scenarios, they should consider the implications of a Biden presidency's likely return to "regular order." This leadership transition would change the relationship between CEOs and the White House, returning it to a more traditional format, but one which will be nonetheless new and more demanding for many executives. ♦

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